Oath Keepers

"Stewart Rhodes" redirects here. For the New Zealand cricketer, see Stewart Rhodes (cricketer).

For the Game of Thrones episode, see Oathkeeper.

Not to be confused with Promise Keepers.

Oath Keepers is an American far-right[1] anti-government[2][3] militia organization[4] composed of current and former military, police, and first responders who pledge to fulfill the oath that all military and police take in order to "defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic".[5] It encourages its members to disobey orders which they believe would violate the U.S. Constitution. The organization claims a membership of 35,000 as of 2016, though the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has estimated its membership at several thousand.[6][7] Researchers estimate the number as probably no higher than 5,000.[8]

Oath Keepers	
Formation	March 2009; 12 years ago
Founder	Stewart Rhodes
Region	United States
Leader	Stewart Rhodes
Board of directors	Stewart Rhodes, Michele Imburgia, Rex H. McTyeire, Richard Mack, John D. Shirley, Steven C. Homan, Jim Ayala, Jay Stang
Website	oathkeepers.org

Several organizations that monitor U.S. domestic terrorism and hate groups describe the group as extremist or radical. The FBI describes the Oath Keepers as a "paramilitary organization" and a "large but loosely organized collection of militia who believe that the federal government has been coopted by a shadowy conspiracy that is trying to strip American citizens of their rights."[9] Mark Pitcavage of the ADL describes the group as "heavily armed extremists with a conspiratorial and anti-government mindset looking for potential showdowns with the government."[10][11] The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) lists the group's founder Elmer Stewart Rhodes as a known extremist and describes his announced plans to create localized militia units as "frightening".[12] According to the SPLC, the group espouses a number of conspiracy and legal theories associated with the sovereign citizen movement and the white supremacist posse comitatus movement.[13][14][15] SPLC senior fellow Mark Potok describes the group as a whole as "really just an anti-government group who believe in a wild set of conspiracy theories".[12]

Oath Keepers were present wearing military fatigues in Ferguson, Missouri, during the 2014[4] and 2015[1][16] unrest in the city, when members armed with semi-automatic rifles roamed streets and rooftops.[17][18] Members of the group were indicted on conspiracy charges for allegedly staging a planned mission during the 2021 storming of the United States Capitol.[19][7]

Organizational history

Membership

The organization states that full membership is open to "currently serving military, reserves, National Guard, police, fire-fighters, other first responders (i.e. State Guard, Sheriff Posse/Auxiliary, Search & Rescue, EMT, other medical 1st responders, etc.) AND veterans/former members of those services," and that others who support the organization's mission can become associate members.[5] The Oath Keepers says that it has up to 30,000 members, though this figure has been in dispute.[28] The ADL estimates that there are between 1,000 and 3,000 members in the organization and notes that the Oath Keepers stand out for their focus on recruiting current and former government employees.[29]

Prominent members

Donovan Crowl

Crowl, who served in the United States Marine Corps as a helicopter mechanic, has been accused by federal investigators of coordinating part of the January 6 breach of the US Capitol in advance and conspiring to obstruct Congress.[30][31]

Charles Dyer

Main article: Charles A. Dyer

Dyer is a former U.S. Marine Corps sergeant who operated as a prominent advocate for the Oath Keepers, maintaining a popular YouTube channel and acting as a representative at Tea Party rallies. He was charged in 2010 with child rape and illegal weapons possession. Dyer evaded authorities and a search ensued, followed by capture ten days later. In 2012, he was convicted of raping his seven-year-old daughter. The Oath Keepers severed ties with Dyer after his conviction, and later denied a relationship with him.[32][33] Known online as "July4Patriot," he made his anti-government videos during the administration of President Obama. As the criminal case against him developed he continued to make videos claiming that he was being targeted by law enforcement for his role as a "patriot."[34]

Matthew Fairfield

In April 2010, Matthew Fairfield, president of the Cleveland chapter of Oath Keepers, was arrested on charges involving explosives and child abuse images. Law enforcement found a live napalm bomb and other explosives in a storage locker. He was indicted on 97 charges and was sentenced to 16 years in prison in 2011.[9]

Richard Mack

Main article: Richard Mack

Mack is a former sheriff of Graham County, Arizona and a political activist. He is known for his role in a successful lawsuit brought against the U.S. federal government which alleged that portions of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act violated the U.S. Constitution. He is a former lobbyist for Gun Owners of America (GOA) and a two-time candidate for United States Congress. Mack is also the founder of Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA), and established the "County Sheriff Project" movement, both of whom reaffirm what they claim is the constitutional power to refuse to enforce federal laws.[35] He is an Oath Keepers Board Member.

Kelly Meggs

The leader of the Florida chapter of the Oath Keepers, on February 19, 2021, Meggs was charged with conspiracy for involvement in the storming of the Capitol.[36] Two days after Trump's tweet in December 2020 that the January 6 rally "will be wild," Meggs allegedly posted on Facebook, "Trump said It's gonna be wild!!!!!!! It's gonna be wild!!!!!!! He wants us to make it WILD that's what he's saying. He called us all to the Capitol and wants us to make it wild!!! Sir Yes Sir!!! Gentlemen we are heading to DC pack your shit!!" He was arrested in Florida;[37] he pleaded not guilty on March 13, 2021.[38]

Jessica Watkins

Watkins is a 38-year-old veteran of the war in Afghanistan and bar manager in Woodstock, Ohio. She is the commanding officer of the Ohio State Regular Militia, which the FBI has named a "dues-paying subset" of the Oath Keepers. According to the *Ohio Capital Journal*, Watkins formed the militia in 2019. She told the *Journal* that her militia has patrolled 12 protests in total.[39]

According to Watkins' attorney, Watkins acted as "security" at the "Save America" rally before the 2021 storming of the United States Capitol. Watkins further claimed that she was provided with a VIP pass to the rally where she met with Secret Service agents."[40] The U.S. Secret Service denied that any private citizens coordinated with it to provide security on January 6.[40]

Arrested in Ohio on January 18, 2021,[41] Watkins has been accused alongside Donovan Crowl of coordinating part of the US Capitol's breach in advance and conspiring to obstruct Congress. The two attended President Trump's rally and then entered the Capitol building in close coordination with ten or more other people wearing Oath Keepers insignia.[30][9] During a February 26 court hearing, Watkins denounced the Oath Keepers and announced she was disbanding the Ohio State Regular Militia and resigning her Oath Keepers membership to win release on bail. She admitted, "I'm humiliated that I'm here today." Federal judge Amit P. Mehta was unmoved, and ordered her held in jail pending trial.[42]

Graydon Young

Alleged member Graydon Young pleaded guilty to six charges in June 2021, including conspiracy, and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors. It was the first guilty plea in any major conspiracy investigation of the Capitol attack.[43][44]

Antigovernment activities

Opposition to Black Lives Matter and Antifa

Other armed protest activities

Reception

See also

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